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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an orientation to learning centers for middle school teachers. A description is given of the characteristics of a learning center and the kinds of student activities that can best be conducted in an area set apart for individual or small group projects. Benefits from using learning centers, are cited, such as added variety to the classroom routine, enriched instructional activities through visual, auditory, and tactile senses, and encouragment of student motivation and independence. Various uses of learning centers are suggested, including developing specific skills, enriching the existing school curriculum, and providing opportunities for students to explore their own interests. Specific planning concerns in the preparation of a learning center are discussed, focusing on selecting the appropriate type of learning center, specifying objectives, deciding about space and design, acquiring materials, and selecting student groups and learning activities. A bibliography of 50 items on learning centers is included. (JD)

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Learning Centers in the Middle School Classroom

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Learning Centers can be used in middle school classrooms as an alternative to traditional teaching methods. Learning Center activities and materials provide more variety for the students, thus promoting interest and achievement. This paper is intended to provide an orientation to Learning Centers for middle school teachers who are considering using Learning Centers in their classrooms.

Specifically, this paper includes a discussion of: 1) Learning Center characteristics, 2) the rationale for using Learning Centers in the middle school classroom, 3) ways Learning Centers could be used in the middle school classroom, 4) planning and preparation concerns, and 5) suggestions for making the transition to Learning Center use in the middle school classroom.

Learning Center Characteristics

A Learning Center is simply a physical area where children engage in a variety of learning tasks. The character and design of Learning Centers vary greatly in space, materials, and methods according to the purpose of the center. Learning Centers also have clearly stated objectives, and activities are designed to meet these objectives.

Students can often choose from a number of activities in the Learning Center. Some of these activities may be required while others are optional. These activities are geared to the students' interests and represent several ability levels. Activities in a Learning Center may be sequenced to build on previously learned knowledge or skills, or they may be independent of any previously learned topic.

Activities sometimes are self-correcting in the form of answer keys, answer booklets, checklists, and verification devices such as electric boards, matching items, experiments, and manipulative items. Other activities

may require the student to submit answer sheets or completed materials to the teacher for review.

Students are often placed in groups of 5 or 6 and then scheduled for a certain time to work at a Learning Center. Activities may be designed for use by one child, by two children, or by three or more children.

Rationale for Using Learning Centers

Students differ in the way they are affected by emotional, environmental, sociological, and physical learning influences. Emotional influences such as motivation, persistence, responsibility, and the need for structure affect students' learning in different ways. Students also differ in the way they are affected by environmental influences such as the amount of noise or light in the room, the temperature in the room, and the design of the chairs and furniture.

Students differ in their sociological preference for working partners. Some work best by themselves, others work better with one other student. Others work better with a group of three or more. Some students work best with peers, others with adults. Physical influences such as time of day, number of hands-on or written activities, and amount of movement also affect student learning.

Learning centers add variety to the classroom by offering a wide range of these four types of learning influences and provide different ways for children to learn. Learning Centers avoid one-dimensional strategies and include instructional activities using the visual, auditory, and tactile senses.

While Learning Centers focus on academic objectives, there also may be non-academic benefits for the children. Learning Centers can encourage

self-management, self-direction, independence, creativity, sensitivity toward others, critical and reflective thinking, longer attention spans, and better concentration.

Uses of Learning Centers

Learning Centers can be used in the middle school classroom to serve various purposes: 1) to develop specific skills, 2) to enrich the existing school curriculum, or 3) to provide opportunities for students to explore their own interests.

Skill development centers are used after the teacher has instructed the whole class in an area of study. Students are then assigned to these Learning Centers to work with media, manipulatives, and other resources to develop their skills. Many teachers maintain a skills progress chart for each student.

Enrichment centers are also used following a teacher's initial instruction to an area of study. These centers can be used to extend, enrich, and clarify a student's knowledge, skills, or attitudes in selected curricular areas. Enrichment centers may be used to deal with single or multiple subjects, with problems, with projects, or even independent study.

Interest and exploratory centers are designed to capitalize on students' present or anticipated interests. Students are often not required to use these centers since the subject matter is not part of the general classroom curriculum. These centers might focus on hobbies, career exploration, or on other student interests.

The use of Learning Centers is not limited to one subject area. Many Learning Centers examine a variety of subject areas. Since teachers at the middle school level are sometimes responsible for more than one subject area,

a multi-subject approach to Learning Centers could be used in these settings.

Learning Centers also can be used to meet the different ability levels of children within one classroom by providing a choice of activities which reflect the range of student ability.

Planning and Preparation Concerns

Before teachers can use Learning Centers in the middle school classroom, they need to make decisions about planning and preparation. First, teachers need to select which type of Learning Center is appropriate for their particular classroom situation. The centers may be used for skill development, enrichment, or for the exploration of interests.

A second planning concern is the need to specify objectives to identify desired changes in students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

A third planning concern involves decisions about space and design of the center. The amount of space to be allocated to the center along with the location within the room, as well as furniture and equipment needs for the center must be identified. Once these space and furniture needs have been determined, the fourth planning concern is the acquisition of these materials. Some of these materials are commercially available, while others may be created by the teacher.

Since all students in a classroom can not be in a Learning Center at the same time, the fifth planning concern is the need to select students to form groups. These groups then must be scheduled for a time at the Learning Center. A sixth planning concern is the selection of learning activities for the center. A variety of individual and small group activities could be used in a center.

Decisions about evaluation and record keeping need to be made as the seventh planning concern. Charts for individuals or for the entire class are useful in recording student progress. The eighth planning concern is the need to orient the students before Learning Centers are actually used. Before students go to the Learning Center, teachers should discuss the students' responsibilities and demonstrate procedures necessary to complete the Learning Center tasks.

Transition Suggestions

Teachers in middle school classrooms who are considering using Learning Centers need to become familiar with and be prepared for all aspects of planning and preparation discussed above. A number of books provide this necessary background.

Next, teachers should start small -- with one Learning Center. Unforeseen problems might occur when students begin to use the Learning Center and revisions in the management of the Learning Center can be made before more centers are used. Teachers might need to revise various conditions such as directions, behavioral guidelines, materials, time limits, record keeping, scheduling, the number of students in a group, and movement to and from the Learning Center.

Once these refinements in the Learning Center management system are made, the middle school teacher is ready to proceed with the development of additional Learning Centers.

Teachers should proceed with more Learning Centers if they are comfortable with them and if the students like them and learn from them.

Conclusion

A great deal of effort goes into creating a Learning Center, but the

rewards are significant. Learning Centers provide an alternative to traditional teaching methods, add variety to the classroom, and provide opportunities for active learning. By using Learning Centers in their classrooms, middle school teachers can include a wide range of creative activities and therefore make learning more interesting and exciting.

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